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ORIENTAL INFLUENCES IN MEXICO

BY

WALTER HOUGH  
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## ORIENTAL INFLUENCES IN MEXICO

By WALTER HOUGH

Putting aside the mythical or problematic accounts of ancient landfalls, which to be sure are a fascinating field of conjecture, firm ground is reached at the period when the Spaniards governed the Philippines as a dependency of Mexico.

In former times several waves of Malay colonization swept over the Philippines, displacing one another and the original population of woolly-headed Aetas, but later the Chinese overran and conquered the islands. After a time the Chinese yoke was thrown off by the Filipinos, who, being undisturbed for many years, became inert and fell easy prey to the land-grabbing Spaniards of the sixteenth century. Sebu was taken in 1564-65 and Manila in 1571, fifty years after the discovery of the islands by Magellan.

Early in his reign Philip II saw that voyages to the Orient could better be made from New Spain. In 1545, Ruy Lopez de Villalobos was sent from Mexico, but his expedition, though it reached Sebu, was unsuccessful. Then Philip sent Miguel Lopez de Legaspi, a Mexican, who sailed from Navidad in 1564 by the middle route.

Legaspi was a navigator and warrior of the stern stuff of the age—the Dewey of 327 years ago on the same scene—and to him the Spanish Crown ever owed the Philippines. An important result of Legaspi's expedition was the discovery of the route back to Mexico. Contrary to orders, one of the ships of the expedition, commanded by Alonzo de Arellano, turned back from the Philippines and sailed northward to the islands north of Japan, crossed to the Pacific coast off Columbia river, sailed

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southward, and brought up at the port thereafter to receive the golden stream of the East on its way to Spain.

Other complications also made it almost imperative for the Spaniards to reach the Philippines through Mexico. The contests between them and the Portuguese for the possession of the earth had resulted in the famous division of Pope Alexander VI at the beginning of the sixteenth century. This cut off the Spaniards from the former route to the East, when the discovery in 1520 of the Straits of Magellan by that great navigator opened another route, which after several trials proved long and unsatisfactory, and the sailing from Mexico was decided on.

In 1575, Guido de Labazarries was made governor of the Philippines, and from this time the islands were ruled by the viceroys of Mexico. Later the Spanish Crown resumed direct control and appointed governors from the mother country, but commerce was carried on with the Philippines until the separation of Mexico from Spain.

It is an important fact that one of the first cares of Labazarries was the establishment of trade and commerce between China and Manila. This commerce, which was only interrupted by events, had been carried on for centuries, bringing many Chinese traders from the mainland not over 460 miles away.

Many references by De Morga to the commerce carried on between the Philippines and New Spain show that the interchange of products was begun early and that Mexico and the Orient were closely connected.<sup>1</sup> The people of Mexico in this way became familiarized with the products of the East before a similar state of affairs prevailed in Europe, and the going and coming of the viceroys, priests, soldiers, sailors, and traders could not have failed in introducing to Mexico useful plants, manufactures, etc., that have come to be regarded as indigenous products.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Philippine Islands*, by Antonio De Morga, London (Hakluyt Society), 1868.

Manila has long been an emporium of commerce. De Morga<sup>1</sup> says: "The merchants and traders form the greater part of the residents in these islands, on account of the quantity of merchandise which flows in to them (in addition to the produce of the country) from China, Japan, Maluco, Malacca, Siam and Cambodia, Borneo, and other parts, with which they make their ventures, and every year embark them in ships which sail for New Spain." The same authority gives a general account of the articles forming the basis of the trade, and the list is interesting as showing the great variety which might be selected for trade with New Spain.

This commerce so increased that it worked injury to the trade between Spain and her possessions in Peru and Mexico. In 1599 it was suggested, and later acted on, to limit the amount of Mexican money to be used in the Philippine trade in any one year to \$500,000. Just how effective this law was and how much it hampered the free movement of commodities between the countries it is difficult to gather. Perhaps like the prohibition of government officers engaging in trade, it was a good thing if enforced.

It is true in any case that each year for centuries two vessels were dispatched from Manila to New Spain, one a stately galleon, the other a large ship as a convoy on which prohibited goods were carried in a clandestine way. At the time of the arrival of these ships they were joined by other craft coming from Peru and Chili, and it was customary to hold a great fair for thirty days at Acapulco, where commodities from all parts of the world were bartered. Thus Acapulco became the great distributing point whence the commerce of the East was sent to South America. Acapulco, Mexico, and Vera Cruz were the cities in Mexico directly touched by this trade.

During De Morga's time duty of three percent on the merchandise brought from China amounted to \$40,000, and the two percent duty on goods shipped to Mexico reached \$20,000, while the duty from Mexico to the Philippines was \$8000.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, page 336.

The population of Manila, like that of most seaports having extensive commerce, was of very mixed character, the bulk of the foreigners being Chinese, who, while viewed with suspicion, were recognized as being indispensable because they were industrious workers at all employments and demanded small wages. The same is true at this epoch in the Philippines, and there seems to be as little reason for excluding the Chinese now as there was in the sixteenth century. Owing to trouble with the Japanese in 1597, "the governor sent to Japan all the Japanese who were settled in Manila (and they were not a few) and those who came in trading ships."<sup>1</sup> The Chinese have maintained their hold in the Philippines to the present day in spite of various massacres and the stringent enactments to which they have been subjected. There has been a decided mixture of Chinese blood with the natives, forming the class known as mestizos.

The question may be asked, then, whether the centuries of communication between the East and Mexico have had any marked effect upon either. Perhaps the first marked intrusion of the East into Mexico is to be found in the flora of the country. It was the custom of the priests who invariably accompanied or closely followed the Spaniards on their conquests, to select plants, seeds, and other curious objects for introduction into other lands and as presents to royalty. The world is greatly indebted to the missionary fathers for the dissemination of a multitude of useful and beautiful plants whose presence in various unexpected localities has often perplexed botanists.

The Spanish leaders of explorations were not less active in the search for strange products to illustrate to the rulers the remarkable character of the countries which they gained for Spain. That the Pueblo Indians of our Southwest early possessed sheep, horses, cattle, peaches, wheat, etc., is due to the friars of the seventeenth century, to whom also may be attributed many of the plants of the East now thoroughly at home in Mexico and South

<sup>1</sup> De Morga, *op. cit.*, page 86.

America. The return of the viceroys and merchants, who had made fortunes in the Philippines, was no doubt likewise a potent factor in enriching the flora of Mexico by the plants brought from the Orient to beautify their estates.

Wherever the Chinese go they carry with them their native country. In our cities, whenever feasible, they grow their favorite lily, water-chestnut, and gourds. In one of the southern states a farm is devoted to raising and canning Chinese vegetables for the use of our Chinese colony. This gives opportunity for the escape from cultivation of plants that later on may spread widely. There is no reason to doubt that in Mexico this process has gone on for a long time.

With these statements in view it does not seem anomalous to find the cocoanut on the coast of Mexico with the attendant manufactures connected with the tree, as houses from the trunk, thatch from the dead leaves, cups from the nut, toddy from the flower-stalk, and various other products. The toddy is called *tuba*, a Tagal word, and its collection and preparation and the other arts grouped about the cocoanut palm might be transported bodily from Colima to an island in the Pacific without jarring the scene.

The presence in America of the banana which, like the cocoanut, has been fancifully accounted for as the result of some prehistoric dissemination, bears witness to the contact with the East. The banana, which can be propagated only by living plants, came to Mexico by way of Manila within the last 300 years and has been widely distributed over the tropics of America. The same is true of the plantain.

The mango, the most popular fruit in Mexico as well as one of the most delicious, is also an immigrant from the Philippines. This handsome and useful tree is a native of India, and is now grown in parts of Mexico having suitable climatic conditions. Its dense, dark green foliage gives a grateful shade around the palm-thatched jacals of the Indians in the tropic and subtropic-

landscapes of Mexico. There are a number of varieties of the mango in the temperate regions, the one most prized being the large yellow subacid kind called "mango de Manila."

Another East Indian fruit, called by the Mexicans *piña-nona* (*Monstera deliciosa*), is naturalized in the tropic and subtropic zones of Mexico and is frequently offered for sale in the markets.

The list of useful plants introduced from the East into Mexico, probably by way of the Philippines, could be extended, but enough has been presented to show the strong current which began to flow at the close of the sixteenth century. Of ornamental plants and trees also there are not a few naturalized in Mexico. Among these may be mentioned the Chinese umbrella tree, the pepper tree (*Schinus molle*), whose habitat is Australia or India, but which flourishes in Mexico as does the ailanthus in the United States. In the beautiful plazas, a graceful feature of every town and city, one sees rare exotics whose home is in the East.

The debt of the Philippines to the New World must be acknowledged in this connection. The century plant, the prickly pear, and the pineapple came from Mexico, the last furnishing fiber for the *piña* cloth for which the Philippines are famous. The Spaniards early sought to introduce the grape and the olive, fig, pomegranate, and other trees from Castile into the Philippines. Only pomegranates and grapes were successful, and it was found that green vegetables of Spain did not produce seed, an experiment showing lack of judgment.

If, as it seems true, Mexico is indebted to the East for many plants, one should look for traces of that contact among the arts of the country. Search for objects of this kind is one of the most difficult of undertakings. The disintegration of aboriginal populations under contact with the higher races leaves little except the thrum ends of former arts, giving scanty material for restoration.

A number of evidences have been observed, one of which, the making of *tuba*, or palm wine, has been noted. Three kinds of rain-coats were seen in use in Mexico by the writer: (a) the coat

made from pieces of natural texture out of the spathes of palm sewed together; (*b*) the coat consisting of an oblong mat of palm leaves which may also serve as a bed or be rolled up and carried on the back, and (*c*) the coat which outside resembles a thatch, the inside showing the construction by an ingenious looping and knotting of strips of palm leaf with or without attachment to a cord. This last coat envelops the body, extending down below the knees and is tied about the throat. The resemblance of this garment to those of China and Japan is striking, and is not superficial, having points of similarity of construction which appear to indicate that this particular variety of rain-coat was borrowed from the East. In the Philippines there are worn palm rain-coats apparently similar to those of China and probably introduced by the Chinese, since the Malays do not employ this form.

Certain grooved stone mauls or beaters for the manufacture of bark cloth or paper found in Mexico, seem to point to the migration of an art to America from Polynesia, before the Conquest, by way of eastern Asia across Bering strait. The stepping stones are the Indo-Pacific islands, Japan, the northwest coast of America, and southeastern Alaska, Mexico, Central America, and South America. There seems also to have been an introduction of the grooved club of wood (*tapa* beater) into Costa Rica and Honduras from African sources through slaves, who brought into America the *marimba*, a series of wooden tablets with gourd resonators mounted in a frame and struck with hammers to produce music. On the other hand some forms of the Mexican *marimba* are similar to the Malay instrument in not possessing resonators, which shows derivation from the East.

A discussion of the origin of the musical bow has recently appeared. It is generally agreed that the musical bow is not an American invention, and that its presence in the west may be attributed to importation from Africa. It is likewise found among the Malays, who also probably derived it from African peoples. Curiously the fact is brought out that no stringed instruments



were known to the American aborigines prior to the Conquest,<sup>1</sup> so that all instruments of that character found among the native people may be assigned to sources in the Old World.

The *machete* resembles the jungle knives of the East, and it is possible that there may be kinship or community of origin. The introduction of iron into Mexico was by the Spaniards, but Eastern implements of iron may have reached portions of Mexico before those of Spain.

The primitive rope-twisting tool in use in Mexico may be from the Philippines. This device consists of a billet of wood revolving by one end on a movable axis held in the hand, the revolution of the billet twisting the thread attached to it near the axis. The wide range of this simple twisting appliance renders it difficult to trace its origin, but there is strong presumption that it came from the East into Europe or Mexico.

The houses of the Indians in some localities of Mexico show marked traces of foreign influence. For instance, at Ometepe, near the western coast, where there are many negroes, the houses are circular after the African style. It is likely that all the circular houses in Mexico are of African origin, as the native houses are rectangular. The jacals of the Totonacos of Jalapa, with their high thatched roofs having the profile of a truncated pyramid, resemble strikingly the houses of the East Indies, but it is hardly possible to say that the architecture is not indigenous.

A few American games have affinity with those of the Orient. Mr Culin has traced the analogue of the Hindu *pachise*, under the name *patole*, from the ancient Aztecs to the existing Pueblos of New Mexico.

It is well known that various foreign elements have been incorporated into the population of Mexico during historic times. The central plateau shows the marked effect of immediate contact

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<sup>1</sup> O. T. Mason : *Geographical Distribution of the Musical Bow*, American Anthropologist, Nov., 1897. Henry Balfour : *The Natural History of the Musical Bow*, Oxford, 1899.



with the Spaniards in the deterioration of the dominant tribes of that region and their fusion into the great complex called linguistically "the Mexican family." On the east and west coasts the tribes are less modified by Spanish influence, and in the sierras and south of latitude  $20^{\circ}$  the natives remain vigorous and but slightly modified, some tribes in the mountains preserving their primitive state.

In the tropical region one finds the introduction of foreign races most noticeable. The difficulty of securing native labor to work on the plantations, railroads, etc., has led to the employment of great numbers of Chinese, negroes from the West Indies, and Kanakas or other Polynesians. During the colonial period the plantations of Mexico were worked by slaves from every clime, felons, and impressed labor from the native tribes. It is necessary to take into account the effect of these intrusions of the blood and arts of the Mexicans, and in them it is known to be of profound importance.

That there has been a grafting of Chinese and especially of Negro on the Mexican tribes is evident. The writer has observed a number of mestizos of Chinese and Mexican Indians, finding the cross virile and healthy, quite different from the Eurasians, and partaking much less of Chinese than of Mexican characteristics. As in Manila the union is always with Chinese males. The Chinese mixture is perhaps small, and the common terms by which race mixtures are known in Mexico are applied to mixtures of Spaniards, Indians, and Negroes. The names are Mestizo, Mulato, Zambo, Castigo, Morisco, Zambo prieto, Español, and Salta atras of the primary mestizos. The secondary mestizos are called Calpan mulata, Chino, Tenti en el aire, Lobo, No te entiendo, Gibaro, Ahi te estas, Albarrazaso, Cambujo, and Zambo (of the sixth blood).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. E. Cicero, in *Catálogo de la Colección de Antropología del Museo Nacional*, page 86.